

Editorial

Need for a 'Think Tank' for wildlife conservation in India

Indian wildlife is passing through an extremely critical period where almost all the protected areas and species are under human-related pressures in some way or the other. Common species such as House Sparrow, Black Drongo, Indian Roller are becoming uncommon, the countryside which used to harbour Indian Fox, Jackal, Blackbuck, Black-naped Hare in large numbers is now becoming unfavourable to them. Most protected areas are threatened by all of the following or some of them: roads, railways, dams, urban expansion, over-grazing, invasive species, encroachment, illicit wood cutting, unrestricted tourism and mismanagement or plain neglect. Political exigencies have reduced the Chief Wildlife Warden to a mere rubber stamp who allows activities detrimental to wildlife and wild areas because he has to keep his job.

The fight between wildlife guardians and human right defenders is not going anywhere although both appear to agree for protection of forest and wildlife for human welfare. On top of all this are the looming threats of climate change and human population increase – according to demographic estimates India's population will grow to 1.4-1.5 billion in another 40-45 years before stabilizing. The world population is estimated to grow from the present 6 billion to 10-12 billion. If one adds the increase in the consumption level (the Indian middle class will be 600 to 800 million) in another 40 years, the future of wildlife looks very bleak.

However, there is also a silver lining. There is tremendous awakening and appreciation of wildlife and wild places in the general public and corporates. There are hundreds of examples of community-based and community-led environmental protection. India has strong wildlife laws, and protection of wildlife is in the Concurrent List of the Indian Constitution. The Government of India and many state governments proudly advertise about India's wildlife and protected areas, wildlife tourism is increasing, conservation NGO lobby is strong, the Indian Army guards wildlife under its jurisdiction, and India has signed all important international treaties concerning wildlife and wild areas, and we have not lost any (known) species since Independence.

All this is very good, but predictions appear gloomy. Due to pressure on land (going to increase manifold in future), the innocent days of wildlife protection are over where a Sálim Ali has to write to a Prime Minister and a sanctuary is declared or a species brought under protection, or an Indira Gandhi has to lift the phone and advice a chief minister to protect an area and her diktat is complied. It is now more complicated and difficult. The political equation has changed. A government dependent on the support of various political parties, a prime minister or chief minister has to keep in mind the political fallout of stopping mining or shifting a village from the core area of a critical wildlife habitat. The centre and states are not necessarily ruled by the same parties so any advice of the Centre, no matter how useful it may be, is judged politically and not on its merit.

Bickering between wildlife lobby and tribal lobby has reached its zenith, thanks to the controversial Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006. The 'wildlife lobby' says that the Act will destroy the remaining forests, while the tribal lobby says that it will reverse the historical wrong done by the British and perpetuated by the Government of India even after Independence on the original forest dwellers. Interestingly, both the lobbies agree that forests need protection from the bigger threats of mining, dams, roads and land sharks that are waiting to pillage the forest. Can we have some common ground when our aims are same – protection of nature? With proper dialogue and mutual understanding with tribal and forest dwellers, we can even use the Forest (Rights) Act to fight destructive mining and dam projects.

Some wildlife enthusiasts say that people and wildlife, particularly large carnivores, cannot live together so villagers should be shifted from certain identified wildlife areas, while the community-oriented organisations say that people have been living with wildlife for thousands of years, and there are numerous examples of this co-existence, so why shift villagers. The government says that remote villages need electricity, roads, medical facilities, clean water and protection from crop depredation by wildlife, while the wildlife lobby demands shifting of these villages outside the forests to provide them all the facilities of modern life. Wildlife lovers are blamed for their indifference to poor tribals and forest dwellers and their (wildlifers) over-reliance to the creaky enforcement

machinery of the foresters and the police. If tribal activists romanticise forest communities, the wildlifers sometimes seem totally uninterested in the welfare of the forest dwellers, except perhaps to click some questionable pictures of tribals. The community-based organisations romanticise the sustainable lifestyle of tribal as a 'Noble Savage', while the wildlife lobby says that such romantic days are over! Look at the reality. It was okay when forests were vast and human population was small and people's aspirations were low. Now which tribal does not deserve or need electricity, modern medical facilities and education for his/her children like everyone else? So, provide them outside the forests, advice the wildlife supporters. But we can also have a middle path. We can find ways of integrating forest conservation with appropriate development facilities through a mix of zoning, alternative livelihood *in situ*, and where necessary relocation of villagers.

The Wildlife (Protection) Act (WPA) was mainly based for the protection of sanctuaries and national parks, and large vertebrates living therein. It is inadequate to protect seascapes, wetlands, and species living in large landscapes. Most of the large sanctuaries, having multiple-use areas established under the WPA, have failed as they do not consider the rights, knowledge, practices, aspiration and increasing/changing demands of people living inside them. Is it right to stop improvement of a road going to a remote village under the *Pradhan Mantri Sadak Yojana* inside 3,162 sq. km Desert National Park? Is it right to stop sale of private land in the Sardarpur Florican Sanctuary? Or, should we stop construction of a new border road in the Changthang Wildlife Sanctuary as the area falls inside a sanctuary? Did we consult the local people, and in case of Changthang, the army, before declaring such sanctuaries? Can we develop a new legislation to take care of the protection of large natural and semi-natural landscapes with multiple users?

There is a dire need for landscape and seascape level approaches of conservation, which combine all forms of conservation from the standpoint of the management functions or objectives – those that provide strict protection to those that allow multiple uses of the land. From the standpoint of the governance, within the land/sea scapes, we need areas managed by the government agencies and those managed by communities, and the whole range between them. This will become more important as climate change makes ecosystems and species move – they need to have spaces to move into and corridors in between. I think the present PA system in India is inadequate to face such challenges.

With depletion of marine fish stocks (and increasing fish demands), there is a need to develop large Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) where fish and other marine life forms are allowed to breed and recover. Do we have the necessary laws to establish MPAs and wherewithal to monitor them? The IUCN hosted its first International Marine Protected Areas Conference in Australia in 2005, followed by Marine Summit in 2007. The IUCN has called for setting up a global network of MPAs by 2012. Experts say that in order to protect marine biodiversity and allow sustainable fisheries, 20-30 per cent of the seas must be under protection. However, presently only 1 per cent is under protection. Many of these MPAs have to be trans-boundary. Do we have necessary laws and capacity to establish MPAs in the Indian territorial waters? Due to multiplicity of users and stake holders, and large sizes, MPAs need a different approach of protection. They cannot be governed by the WPA, and certainly not managed by the Forest Department. Some could be 'no-take' MPAs (where no extractive uses are permitted) and others could be 'traditional-use' MPAs. Unlike terrestrial PAs, MPAs need not be site specific all the time they can be shifted spatially and temporally. Do we have laws and databases to develop such large MPAs, which can be shifted every five years as the species recover?

It is rightly said that a good war strategist prepares his army keeping the worst-case scenario in mind and has many alternative plans. Unfortunately, we do not have a long-term conservation strategy and our wild-lifers still feel that making a few more sanctuaries (more specifically Critical Wildlife Areas), stopping a road or mine, forcing the government to make WPA more stringent, will save wildlife. Most of our PAs do not even have a vision, conservation targets and long-term plan. Things which have not worked for 60 years will not work in future also, but for many species, we do not have the luxury of time. We have to think 'out-of-the-box' to save them. Can we have a new paradigm shift in our protection and management approach? Should we commercialise wildlife protection, like it is done in South Africa, Tanzania, Kenya, Botswana with great success. Should we allow private parks and sanctuaries in India? Should many more community conservation areas be encouraged? Should we import tourism-based African model of conservation or should it be 'Indianised' to keep our cultural and social sensitivities.

Some of our PAs are suffering from their own success. For example, in Ranthambore and Bandhavgarh there is now a restriction on the number of vehicles entering each day in the park. Nature-based tourism traffic will increase as Indians become rich. Can we replicate the success of Ranthambore in other forests, which are at present neglected? Unfortunately, local people who have to make way for luxury tourist resorts hardly benefit from tourism. Can we provide resources and training to locals to provide home-stays? Home-stay concept is a great success in Ladakh and other remote hill areas. Can this more socially responsible tourism model be replicated in other areas. When we have many good examples of community conservation, why not involve grass-root communities in protection and co-management?

In the absence of proper land use plan of the whole country, we suffer from increasing conflicts for location of factories, dams, ports, Special Economic Zones, mines, oil explorations etc. in or near PAs and other natural areas. We do not even have a national grazing policy as a result of which a bank will loan to a villager to purchase livestock in an area which is already suffering from over-grazing, or an irrigation canal is built in the main grassland of shepherds, displacing and marginalizing them.

As far as I know, no one has done predictive modelling on our PAs and wildlife keeping in mind climate change and resulting demographic shifts of human populations (including from Bangladesh), general increase in human population and consumerism, changing consumer demands both nationally and globally, world trade, social unrests, terrorism and its linkage with smuggling of wildlife product, globalization, increasing consumption of wildlife products by our giant neighbour, and biofuel demands. Can we have various models predicting scenarios at different time intervals to indicate what the future of our wildlife will look like in 2015, 2020, 2025, and so on.

Looking at the increasing complexities of wildlife protection, I suggest that we should establish a Wildlife Think Tank in India consisting of wildlife field scientists, activists, PA managers, foresters, grass-root community leaders, social scientists, corporates, planners, thinkers, armed forces, lawyers, judges, strategists, intellectuals, grass-root social workers, economists, climatologists and visionaries who can talk to each other and come up with issue-based guidelines and strategies. Such think tanks or policy research institutes exist in other fields such as defence, economics and foreign policy, so why not for wildlife?

The days are over when only the mandarins of Ministry of Environment and Forests are expected to show concern about wildlife. Wildlife concerns and interest have to be integrated and internalised by all the departments of the governments. We need visionaries who can tell us what will be the situation of wildlife in India when it becomes as developed as Europe in another 40-50 years. Outdated ways of thinking and repeating failed models of wildlife conservation in 'developed' India will only spell further disaster for our wildlife and wild places.

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